Lawyer denies he told Ray to plead guilty

Washington — (UPI) — Trial lawyer Percy Foreman denies he recommended that James Earl Ray plead guilty to the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., although he advised Ray the alternative was "more than a 99 percent chance of getting a death sentence."

"James Earl Ray's plea of guilty originated with James Earl Ray," Foreman told the House Select Committee on Assassinations yesterday.

"I have never recommended to any client that they take any penalty. He will curse you every day in the penitentiary he goes to."

The committee considered this an important point because of a publicized theory that Ray was pressured into pleading guilty to avoid a trial that might implicate high-level accomplices in the police or the FBI.

Foreman also said that he became convinced through jailhouse interviews that Ray assassinated Dr. King in the hope of becoming a hero to whites.

Another witness, ex-prosecutor Phil Canale, who negotiated Ray's sentence with Foreman, said acceptance of a guilty plea is routine when a defendant agrees to an adequate sentence. He said he knew of no pressure on Ray.

Ray has since said that one reason he pleaded guilty was strain caused by brutal conditions in the Shelby County Jail in Memphis, Tenn., where he was confined from July 1968 to March 1969.

But Dr. McCarthy DeMere, assigned to watch Ray's health, testified that he spent a "relaxed time" as the only inmate in a cellblock built for 12.

Foreman testified that he wrote Ray in 1969 — seven months after Ray was caught in London and returned to Memphis — that he believed it was 100 percent certain a trial would mean conviction, and that it was more than 99 percent certain Ray would get a death sentence.

"If I am able to save your life by negotiation with the attorney general and the court, I will consider it one of the great accomplishments of my career in the courtroom," Foreman wrote.

But Foreman insisted his letter merely gave Ray the facts.